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AUTHOR	Beller, Jennifer
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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the formal and informal processes of moral character development through sport in light of the types of programs that have shown to improve moral character, sportsmanship, and fair play, noting that such efforts involve combined lifelong formal and informal educational processes with three interrelated dimensions: knowing, valuing, and doing the right thing. Informal moral character development is highly influenced by the environment, as well as the mass media. Typical programs take advantage of teachable moments. Role modeling as an informal process of character education holds that leaders take responsibility for their actions and demonstrate good character. The formal process of character education is a direct and purposeful intent to affect character development, with individuals challenged to reflect upon moral issues, values, and principles in relationship to others and society, translating those reflections into good moral action. Formal character education can involve extensive study whereby athletes are challenged by peers, instructors, and themselves through reading, writing, discussion, and reflection on issues of honesty, fair play, responsibility, and decency toward others. Less time-intensive programs involve education through training videos. In contrast to informal programs, formal moral education programs are more difficult and time intensive to implement. (Contains 23 references.) (SM)

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By

Jennifer Beller

December 2002 EDO-SP-2002-06

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Positive Character Development in School Sport Programs

Jennifer Beller

Introduction

Sportsmanship and the development of positive character have long been explicit goals of school sports. A strong belief exists that sport programs have the power to promote the development of "...sportsmanlike behaviors, ethical decision-making skills, and a total curriculum for moral character development" (Stoll, 1995, p. 335) and provide a social environment to acquire personal and social values and behaviors contributing to good character and good citizenship (Arnold, 1984; Sage, 1998). The arena of sport can provide one of "the greatest opportunities for a student to learn honesty, integrity... and ethical behavior" or it can provide "one of the greatest opportunities in school for a youngster to learn how to be dishonest...or how to be hypocritical" (Sabock, 1985, p. 271). Little empirical research exists supporting that mere participation in and of itself leads to the development of moral character. In fact, the opposite appears true, that sport participation may be more likely to negatively affect moral character (Bredemeier, 1984; Priest, Krause, & Beach, 1999; Stoll & Beller, 2000). Whether positive or negative, "[s]ports have immense power to shape consciousness, values, and beliefs of athletes and to pass on selected aspects of the dominant culture" (Sage, 1998, p. 264). This digest discusses the formal and informal processes of moral character development, in light of the types of programs that have shown to improve moral character, sportsmanship, and fair play.

Terminology

Two different types of character values exist and are evident in sport: social and moral. Typical social character values include loyalty, dedication, sacrifice, teamwork, and good citizenship (Lumpkin, Stoll & Beller, 2002), while moral values include honesty, fairness, fair play, justice, and responsibility. Social values, which are highly esteemed in our society, are about the real world and how society views the importance of social character. Moral values are first principles, meaning that they stand by themselves; if we violate any one of these, we violate people directly. Social values are positive assets but must be tempered by moral values. A person who has strong social character may have little or no moral character. An individual can be highly dedicated and loyal to an immoral cause. Because sport may foster social values, character development through sport should help athletes learn to weigh a social value against a moral value and then act on that moral value (Lumpkin, et al., 2002).

Sportsmanship/fair play means playing as a good sport and following the moral values of honesty and justice (Lumpkin et al., 2002). The player plays by the rules and is fair and honest to his/her opponents.

"Character education refers to the deliberate and intentional activity of cultivating, modeling, and teaching moral growth and moral judgment" (Stoll, 2000, p.3). The goal of this process is for individuals to build moral habits with a disposition to act upon moral judgment (Kohlberg, 1981).

Components of Moral Character

Moral character development is a combined lifelong formal and informal educational process (Stoll & Beller, 1999) with three interrelated dimensions: knowing, valuing, and doing the right thing (Lickona, 1989), with the result being moral character.

Informal Character Education Programs

Environment.

The informal process of moral character development is highly influenced by the environment ("...all of life's lived experiences, which begins with our immediate families, family traditions, family values, religious training, and family history...school work and play,") as well as television, newsprint, sports, and movies (Stoll & Beller, 1999, p. 2). While individuals learn from their family, traditions, friends, and religious groups, when they enter the world of sport, they tend to be heavily influenced by what their peers value and practice. Societal norms, values, and practices in general and in sport also shape the environment as does the media through television, movies, and newsprint (Stoll, 2000). In order to affect character positively, environmental character education programs attempt to shape the groups that influence the athlete's thinking and behavior to encourage the athlete's moral actions so they are more respectful to others.

The typical program involves taking advantage of teachable moments (http://www.nfhs.org), discussing scenarios (Spencer, 1996), hanging posters, lettering marquees, and making verbal announcements using "word of the day/week/or month" (Fisher, 1998) or viewing motivational sportsmanship videos. Some programs involve rewarding good behavior on the playing field where game officials award teams points for wins, losses, ties, and good sportsmanship (Butler, 2000). Teams with as many sportsmanship violations as wins do not fare well in the final league standings. Character education programs for fans frequently involve team captains standing before spectators discussing expectations for fans as well as their own and their opponents play (Nelson, 1992). The goal is for fans to treat each other and all participants with respect and dignity.

Codes of Ethics attempt to address the environment through prescribing player, coach, and parental behavior. These codes are grounded in principles that concern ethical conduct towards colleagues, athletes, and the community (Lumpkin et al., 2002). For codes to be effective in shaping the environment, education about the organization's values and code must occur.

Role Modeling.

Role modeling as an informal process of character education holds that leaders take responsibility for their actions and demonstrate good character. Any person can serve as a role model and teach through actions and words. Significant people in an athlete's life such as teachers, coaches, parents, administrators, other athletes and boosters teach through verbal and nonverbal instruction, including body language, gestures, and facial expressions (Docheff, 1998; Lumpkin et al., 2002). These individuals, whether aware or not, are in a position to assist young people in the development of their character. If they are leaders of moral character, the outcome of this endeavor is generally positive.

Each of these informal educational programs, while relatively easy to implement, provides limited empirical evidence indicating that individual moral character actually improves. They may, however, help create a moral awareness that leads to the development of formal educational programs.

Formal Character Education Programs

"The formal process of character education is a direct and purposeful intent to affect character development" (Stoll & Beller, 1999, p. 2). Individuals are challenged to reflect upon moral issues, values, and principles in relationship to others and society, translating those reflections into good moral action. This process involves three parts: knowing and valuing the right which should lead to doing the moral right (Lickona, 1989). Knowing involves moral awareness, moral values, perspective-taking, moral reasoning, decision-making, and self-knowledge. Moral feeling involves self-

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esteem, empathy, loving the good, self-control, and humility. Moral action involves competence, will, and habit. The three processes work in concert since what athletes and coaches know and feel affects their behavior and their behavior affects what they know and feel.

Formal character education can involve extensive study whereby athletes are challenged by peers, instructors, and themselves through reading, writing, discussion, and reflection on issues of honesty, fair play, responsibility and decency towards others (Stoll & Beller, 2000). The goal is to develop a consistent and impartial set of moral principles to live by. A workbook program, Winning in Life: A Team Life Skills Program, challenges athletes to reason morally by examining moral and social issues in sport in discussion sessions (Stoll & Herman, 2002). This program is based on the belief that an ultimate right exists. Teaching moral reasoning is not easy, but in the hands of skilled, well-educated moral development specialists this type of methodology is highly effective (Stoll & Beller, 2000).

Less time-intensive programs, with empirical research support, involve education through training videos. The Fair Play Everyday video, using three commonly occurring sport scenarios, challenges athletes and coaches to answer three questions of right conduct when addressing fair play issues on the field: Is it honest?, Is it fair?, and Does it promote cooperation (Hansen, Stoll, & Beller, 1999; Hansen, Stoll, & Beller, 2000). The National Federation of High School Activity Association's video, Sport, Ethics & Integrity, involves athlete, coach, and administrator discussions about what makes a sportsmanship practice acceptable or unacceptable (http://www.nfhs.org).

Other research-based programs use Haan's (1978) morality model in sport camp situations, involving moral balance, moral dialogue, and moral truth (Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, & Shewchuck,1986; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). Moral balance, an explicit or non-explicit agreement about rights and privileges, means that individuals are basically in agreement. When out of agreement, moral dialogue (direct or indirect, verbal or nonverbal) is used to help restore moral balance. Studies using these programs have been effective, especially in youth sport populations (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995).

In contrast to informal programs, formal moral education programs are more difficult and time intensive to implement. These programs require personnel who are educated in theories of moral development and ethics and able to challenge students' personal values and beliefs as they relate to principles and societal views (Stoll, 1995). Studies using formal moral education strategies have demonstrated success in fostering and improving athletes' moral reasoning (Beller & Stoll, 1992; Beller & Stoll, 2000; Hansen, Stoll, & Beller, 2000; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995).

Conclusion

The development of character through sport can be systematic or non-systematic and involve formal and/or informal processes. Well-organized sport character education can provide powerful contexts for the teaching and learning of good moral habits. Even though formal education programs may be in place, informal education may conflict with what is considered the right, good, and fair. These powerful tools can have a positive or negative impact on athletes. The ideal would be sport programs that address both formal and informal educational processes for character development. For character education programs to succeed, athletes need both thinking and reasoning programs, role models, a supportive environment, and the strong moral/philosophical commitment of community members, parents, coaches, teachers, students, boosters, and the media.

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Mary E. Dilworth, Director

Pat Sullivan, Associate Director — Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance

Jennifer Beller, University of Idaho (Author)

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